

Google offers peek into Bhutan with Street View launch (Update)

October 23 2014, by Ammu Kannampilly



Google product communications manager Stephanie Shih demonstrates a Google Street View of Thimphu, on October 23, 2014

Google provided a sneak peek into Bhutan Thursday by unveiling a Street View project for the remote Himalayan kingdom, featuring panoramic views of its majestic mountains, monasteries and crystal-clear rivers.

The "Land of the Thunder Dragon" has long been one of the most

isolated countries on earth, only lifting its ban on television in 1999. Most foreign tourists have to pay a minimum \$200 a day to visit.

But in a sign of its more recent embrace of modern technology, the government allowed Google to undertake a Street View project that could showcase some its natural treasures for Internet users.

"Most governments love Street View because it promotes tourism—they are drawn to its commercial benefits," Google's Divon Lan, one of the Street View managers, told AFP on Thursday as the project was launched.

"In Bhutan, the conversation was very different—essentially along the lines of 'how can we bring Bhutan to the world without having floods of tourists turn up and erode our culture?'"

The year-long project kicked off in March 2013 with a Street View car travelling across the country's 3,000-kilometre road network.

The car, mounted with a custom-built camera containing 15 lenses that recorded more than a million photos, drew some curious responses during its journey, Lan said in an interview in the sleepy capital Thimphu.

"Villagers would see this strange-looking car and ask the driver about it. When he told them it was being used to take photos, they would get very excited and try to peer inside," added Lan, who was involved in the digital mapping of Cambodia's Angkor Wat temple complex.

The resulting stream of rapid-fire 75 megapixel images offers audiences a view of a land seen by very few, with the country welcoming its first tourists just 40 years ago.



Google's Street View manager Divon Lan speaks during an interview with AFP in Thimphu, on October 23, 2014

Since then, its stunning scenery and its reputation as a Buddhist "Shangri-La" has attracted tourists, but numbers are tightly controlled.

Delicate balance

As well as being able to catch a glimpse of Thimphu, virtual visitors will now be able to see attractions such as a 17th century monastery known as the "Palace of Happiness" in the former capital of Punakha.

Other sites include the national museum which is housed in a 17th century watchtower in the town of Paro and the Trongsa Dzong, the country's largest fortress which overlooks a rocky river gorge in central

Bhutan.

Despite its past reputation as a hold-out against the 20th century's advances, Bhutan has become something of a champion of the Internet and mobile technology era.

It has a largely rural population of just 750,000, but Bhutan's two cellular networks have 550,000 subscribers. And the last official figures in 2012 showed more than 120,000 Bhutanese had some kind of mobile Internet connectivity.

Tourists however say the remoteness of a country which is wedged between China and India remains its main attraction.



Google's Street View manager Divon Lan spins prayer wheels in Thimphu, on October 23, 2014

Its approach to tourism reflects "an incredibly delicate balance" between seclusion and openness, said Melissa Biggs Bradley, CEO and founder of the luxury travel website Indagare.com.

"One of the great appeals to the tourist is how closed it is, how rare it is to see another tourist and therefore how easy it is to have meaningful exchanges with locals," Bradley, who visited Bhutan for the first time last month, told AFP.

Her views were echoed by Mary Jane South, a 52-year-old Canadian on her maiden visit to the country.

South told AFP Bhutan offered "more of a road less traveled experience" compared to neighbours like Nepal, which saw 800,000 visitors last year, nearly eight times the number recorded by Thimphu.

Damcho Rinzin, spokesman for the national Tourism Council of Bhutan, said that while visitors were welcome, the country did not want to become just another travellers' destination.

The push to preserve traditional culture is reflected in the traditional clothing worn by men and women—mandatory at public functions and offices.

"Google Street View is a way of preserving our culture at a time of great change. It reminds us of what we have in Bhutan," Rinzin said.

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